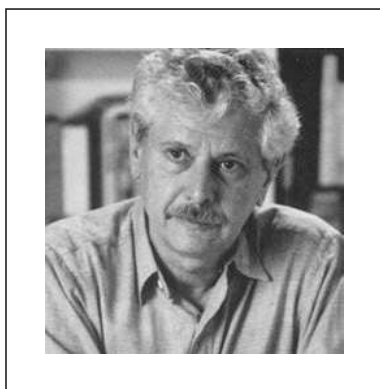


May Hill Arbuthnot Honor Lecture

The Past Isn't Past: How History Speaks and What It Says to the Next Generation

Russell Freedman



Russell Freedman is the author of many books, including Children of the Great Depression, The Life and Death of Crazy Horse, and Lincoln: A Photobiography, and the 2006 May Hill Arbuthnot Honor Lecturer award recipient. He delivered the Arbuthnot address on April 28, 2006, at the historic Kimball Theater in Williamsburg, Virginia.

As someone who has written a number of books about American history, allow me to say at the outset that I am thrilled to be standing here, about to deliver the Arbuthnot lecture in Williamsburg, where the spirit of so much of that history resides. I wish to thank Noreen Bernstein and everyone else at the Williamsburg Regional Library for making this evening possible. And I'm grateful to the members of the Arbuthnot Committee for including me among the select band of authors, editors, critics, and librarians who have given this lecture in the past. It is an extraordinary honor.

It's also, I must admit, a sobering responsibility. The Arbuthnot lecturer is charged with, and I quote, "preparing a paper considered to be a significant contribution to the field of children's literature." Now, that's enough to give anyone pause.

Once you get over the initial rush of being anointed by the Arbuthnot committee, the realization dawns that you will be facing an audience waiting expectantly to hear your own personal significant contribution to children's literature. That's when vanity crumbles in the face of doubt and apprehension, when you begin to feel that you might want to head for the hills.

The truth is, when I sit down to write, I simply want to capture the reader's attention and tell a story about a person, an event, or a series of events that for some reason happen to interest me. I want to lose myself in the world where those events took place, and through the transformative power of language, make that world, that person, those events live again for my readers. If I said to myself, "Today I'm going to make a significant contribution to children's literature," I would probably lose my mind. Certainly, I would never get a word written.

So this evening, let me begin with a story. When I think about the past—why it beckons to us, what it has to say—I sometimes recall the opening scene in Giorgio Bassani's novel, *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*. A group of friends are on a weekend outing in the countryside north of Rome when the child

among them, a nine-year-old girl named Giannina, asks, "Where are we going?"

Her father takes a hand off the steering wheel and tousles Giannina's black curls. "We're going to take a look at some tombs that are more than four or five thousand years old," he replies, in the tone of someone about to tell a fairy tale, unconcerned about the accuracy of his figures. "Etruscan tombs," he adds.

"How sad," Giannina sighs, pressing her head against the back of the seat.

"Sad? Why? In school, haven't they told you about the Etruscans?"

"In our history books, the Etruscans are right at the beginning, next to the Egyptians and the Jews."

On the road up ahead, groups of local young people, boys and girls on their Sunday stroll, are walking toward them. Some are strolling arm in arm, some are singing, and they're all laughing, chattering, and staring with curiosity through the windows of the strangers' car.

"Papa," Giannina asks, "why is it that ancient tombs are not as sad as new ones?"

"It's obvious," her father says. "People who've just died are closer to us, so we love them more, you see. The Etruscans, after all, have been dead for a long time, so long it's as if they had never lived, as if they had *always* been dead."

Giannina is silent as she watches the last of the laughing young people pass the car and continue down the road. "But now that you've said that," she says softly, "you remind me that the Etruscans were also alive once, and so I love them as much as everyone else."

In this way, the child reminds her elders that, however long ago, the Etruscans did really live; they were alive once, just like everyone else. And the tombs they visit that afternoon bear out Giannina's simple reflection, the remarkable tenderness of what she said. The walls of the tombs are decorated with polychrome plaster casts of all the familiar, trusted objects the Etruscans used in their everyday

lives—axes and hoes, ropes, scissors, spades, and knives, bows and arrows, even hunting dogs and marsh birds, concrete evidence of the activities that distinguish the quick from the dead.

Looking at those artifacts, the visitors can imagine what the Etruscans' frequent visits to this ancient cemetery must have meant to those who are lying there now in their funeral beds arranged in niches along the limestone walls. They would have come from their nearby homes, probably on foot, in family groups, as troops of young people such as those the visitors had just encountered on the road, as pairs of lovers or friends, people alone—just as today, in provincial Italian villages, the cemetery gate is still the place where every evening stroll is bound to end.

And so the questions arise: What does it mean to have lived? Why do we feel such a strong connection with the past? "It was Giannina who prepared us to understand," says the narrator of Bassani's novel. "It was she, the youngest, who somehow guided us."

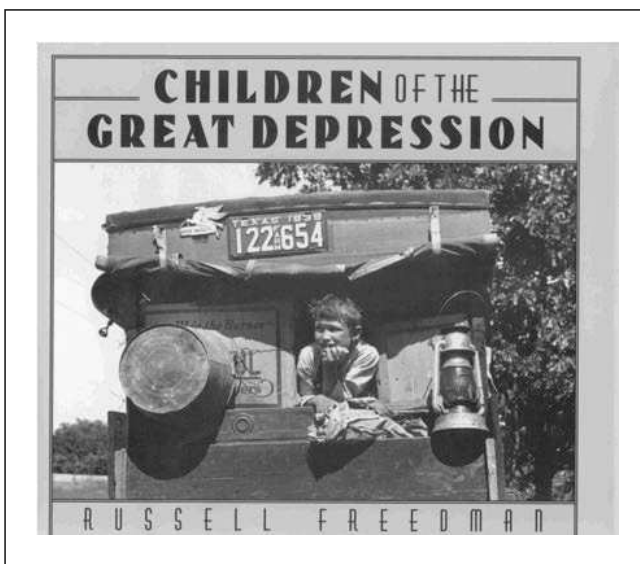
Recently I was chatting with my ten-year-old godson, Jacob, when he startled me by asking, "Uncle Russell, do you realize that there are people alive today who were born in the nineteenth century?" Jacob had been poring over his copy of the *Guinness Book of World Records*, and among all the superlatives—the biggest, the fastest, the strongest, the smartest—he had chosen the oldest survivors among us as a topic of conversation. He was fascinated by people who had lived in what to him must seem the ancient past. "Have you known anyone who was born in the nineteenth century?" he asked.

"When I was growing up," I told him, "I knew many people who were born in the nineteenth century." Jacob looked at me with amazement. "That's awesome," he said.

My stepmother, Rose, celebrated her one hundredth birthday in November. Every Sunday, Rose completes the *San Francisco Chronicle* crossword puzzle in

ink—and that's before breakfast. She's an avid political junkie who watches CNN, listens to NPR, and worries about the state of the nation. She disapproves of George W. Bush, and yet she is quick to show every visitor the telegram she received from the president when she turned one hundred.

Among the visitors to her assisted-living apartment are small groups of teenagers, two or three at a time, who want some contact with older people and have volunteered to take part in an intergenerational program. They meet with Rose, as they do with other elders, and interview her. They ask about her life, her parents



and grandparents, and what it was like to be young in San Francisco so long ago. Rose sits in a wheelchair, but her voice is sprightly, her memory sharp, and her sense of story better than ever.

When I was born, Herbert Hoover was president. I remember reading his obituary when he died in 1964. And I came across the most remarkable fact. When Hoover was an infant, his nanny was an elderly woman who was born while George Washington was still alive. The history of the United States encapsulated in a couple of lifetimes!

I once read (I believe it was in Alvin Toffler's *Future Shock*) that if a person could stand at one end of a city block and hold the hand of someone from the previous generation, who in turn is holding the hand of someone from the gen-

eration before that, and so on down the line, Socrates could be standing at the end of the block with room to spare. You could yell to him down there, and maybe he would reply. "Hey, Socrates! Here's a question I've been meaning to ask you!" The distant past, ancient history, isn't all that distant.

What accounts for our yearning to be connected to the past? Developmental psychologists tell us that we come into the world with the desire to know where we came from, and with the powerful human need for narrative, what Vivian Gornick has called "the compelling hunger to make sense of experience through words spun out in a story." That's how we understand our own lives, by telling stories about the things that happen to us. We tell stories in order to affirm our being and our place in the scheme of things. The human brain seems programmed to do this. "All sorrows can be borne," said Isak Dinesen, "if you put them into a story."

Storytelling is what unites all genres; fiction, nonfiction, war reporting, lecturing, whatever—it's all storytelling. Anyone can tell a joke, that's storytelling. So is history. That's why the word "history" is made up mostly of the word "story." Historians have always been storytellers. Going all the way back to Homer and beyond, historians have been men and women who were telling, singing, reciting epic poems about the past. They were storytellers sitting beside the fire inside the cave, holding their audience spellbound on a winter's night.

When Christopher Columbus stepped ashore in the Caribbean on his first voyage of exploration, he met a people called the Tainos, the dominant ethnic group in the West Indies at that time, the first Native Americans that Europeans encountered. The Spaniards were astonished by the Tainos' elegant and reverent sense of history. They preserved their ancient cultural traditions at feasts called *areytos*, which means "remembrance" or "to recall." The purpose of these feasts, with their festive songs and

dances, was to bring back to mind and heart everything that gave these people an understanding—an appreciation—of their roots on earth. “Their songs,” wrote a Spanish observer, “are their books and memorials, transmitted from generation to generation, from fathers to sons, and from those who are alive today to those who will arrive . . . Thanks to their *areytos*, they could recall things of their past.”

When I was researching my biography of Crazy Horse, I discovered that a cousin of his, a fellow named Amos Bad Heart Bull, was a tribal historian who recorded the history of his people, the Oglala Sioux, by means of pictographs, or picture-writing. I was able to use many of his pictographs as illustrations in my book.

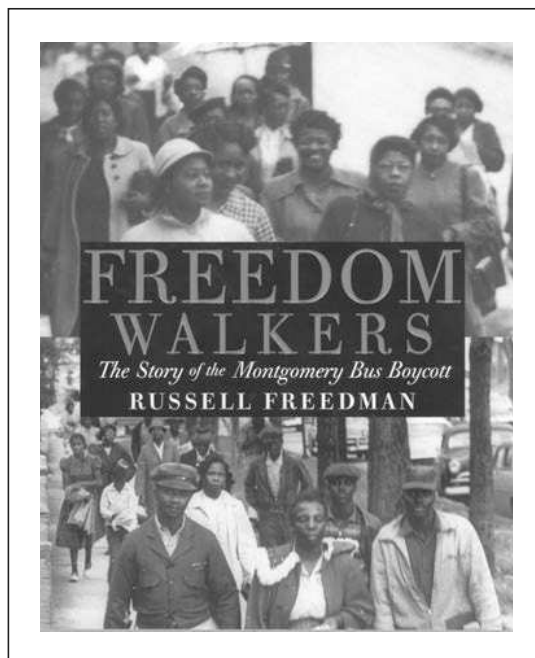
Amos was working in an ancient tradition. Every Sioux band had a duly appointed historian who drew picture histories of important events. The pictures were drawn on deerskin, on buffalo or elk hides, or later, toward the end, on cloth or paper, or in the pages of ledger books, as was the case with Amos. Those pictures told the stories of battles, hunts, ceremonies, buffalo stampedes, and all sorts of memorable happenings. The Sioux had a saying: “A people without history is like wind on the buffalo grass.”

On ceremonial occasions, or when important visitors were present, the band historian would be called on to recite the story of some great deed or testing. Unrolling his big picture skin, he would recount the event with oratorical flourishes and with the aid of his pictographic portrayal. As the story unfolded, it took on subplots, unexpected twists, and turns. The magic was in the telling, as it is today.

Children would gather round and sit at the historian’s feet as he told the Sioux hero tales that he himself had heard as a child. He was telling them stories about the past, their own past—the history of the Oglala Sioux. It’s clear why those stories held their attention, why those youngsters leaned forward in joyful anticipation: they wanted to find out what was going to happen next in the past.

If some kids today feel that history is

boring, it may be because they are subjected to boring accounts of the past, delivered by bland, noncommittal, committee-written, politically approved textbooks. Some textbooks I’ve seen convey no personal voice, no clearly stated point of view, no coherent vision. Often there seems an uncertainty about how much to include, an anxiety about what groups might object. And with the current emphasis on standardized testing, youngsters are being force-fed names, dates, and facts, stripping historical events of all human meaning. That’s not history. History should be as compelling as any adventure story.



Kids want to know how their world came to be, how events in the past affect their lives today, how the experiences of others can help them understand themselves. A knowledge of history can give youngsters a sense of their place in the world, a sense of home. When you lose your connection to the past, you lose your sense of place. You become a refugee, a wanderer in no-man’s land.

I believe it was William Faulkner who said, “The past is not dead. It isn’t even past.”

Unfortunately, for an alarming number of American youth, the past scarcely exists. A few years ago, graduating seniors from the nation’s top fifty universities were asked to name the American general who won the Battle of Yorktown—that

crucial battle which secured the colonists’ triumph over British forces in the Revolution. To make things a little easier for those graduating seniors, they were given four choices: William Sherman, Ulysses Grant, Douglas MacArthur, and George Washington.

So which general was at the Battle of Yorktown? Two out of three graduates didn’t have the faintest idea. Many of them picked Grant. And six percent picked MacArthur.

According to another survey carried out for the National Constitution Center, an independent nonprofit group, more young Americans could name the Three Stooges than the three branches of government.

So it appears that many of our country’s educated youth are suffering from historical amnesia. America’s historical memory is fading. Some educators say that the problem is getting worse because history and civics are receiving less attention in public schools, the result of a nationwide focus on reading and math, which are the easiest and least controversial subjects to test, and which take up an increasing part of the school day. Thanks to the No Child Left Behind Act, which imposes sanctions on schools where students fail to make annual progress on reading and math tests, many schools are reducing the time spent on history and social science, geography, music, and art, or even eliminating those subjects.

David McCullough, the popular historian, is one of many who have faulted the law. In testimony before a U.S. Senate committee last summer, McCullough said, “Because of No Child Left Behind, sadly, history is being put on the back burner or taken off the stove altogether in many or most schools, in favor of math and reading.”

My current book, *Children of the Great Depression*, is about an era that rarely makes it onto the schoolhouse stove, much less into the kitchen. It’s an era that shaped the nation we live in today, that still exists in living memory, and that most kids know little or nothing about. And it’s an era that I personally

can remember. I was born two weeks before the stock market crashed in 1929. According to a family story, I once asked my mother what time of the day I was born. "At 11:30," she replied.

"At night or in morning?"

"You were born at 11:30 at night."

"Did I wake you up?" I asked.

When I entered Mrs. Springer's kindergarten class at Cabrillo Elementary School in San Francisco, the United States was still struggling to emerge from the Depression, the worst economic catastrophe in the nation's history. My family was fortunate. My father had a good job as manager of the West Coast office of the Macmillan Publishing Company. But I can remember the shabby clothes worn by some of my classmates, the kids who had nothing to eat at lunch except the free orange and carton of milk handed out by the school, and the closed and shuttered shops along Geary Street.

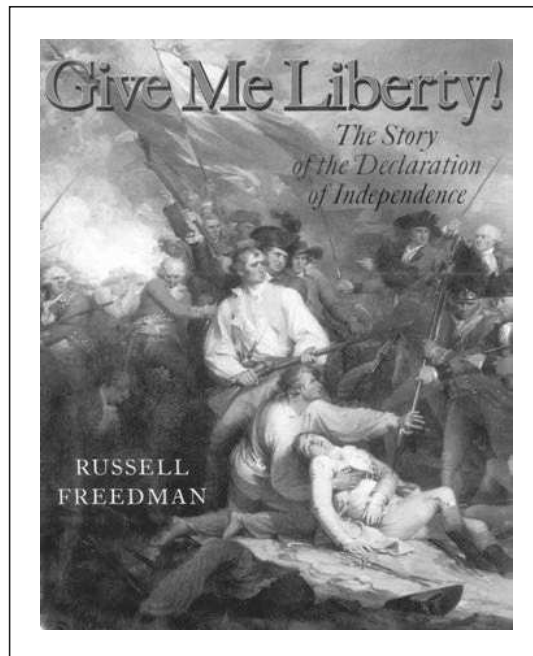
One day my mother took me with her when she visited a friend who lived up a steep flight of stairs in a neighborhood I had never visited before. I sat quietly in a corner as they talked. When we rose to leave, the two women embraced. And I watched as my mom pressed some money into her friend's hands. Outside, down the stairs, back on the sidewalk, my mother began to sob. She turned to me, tears smudging her makeup, and commanded, "Don't you dare mention this to anyone!"

Early one Sunday morning, while my mother and sister were still sleeping, my father said, "Let's take a drive." We drove out along the old Bayshore Highway toward south San Francisco, over a rise in the road, and in a valley down below, we saw an encampment of the homeless—a Hooverville, as they were called—hundreds of ramshackle shanties, crude tarpaper shacks built of loose boards and flattened boxes, and people moving among them, mostly men, as I recall, but families, too, and some kids, and here and there, wisps of smoke spiraling up toward the highway, where cars were speeding past.

"What are they doing down there?" I asked my father. "They're making coffee," he said. It was that small detail—making coffee, something I observed every morning in my own warm kitchen—that put the scene down below into a meaningful human perspective.

I knew early on that I wanted to be a writer. I was lucky enough to be growing up in a house bursting at the seams with books. And not only that, Dad often invited authors home for dinner. John Masefield, the poet laureate of England, had dinner at our house when I was a boy. So did John Steinbeck, Margaret

Pease, who wrote exciting adventure stories about boys who ran away from home and sailed all over the world in the merchant marine. Howard Pease was my J. K. Rowling. And Stuart Ormsby, the hero of *Shanghai Passage*, was my Harry Potter. I believe that I read every book Howard Pease ever wrote. Sure, Margaret Mitchell, William Saroyan, and John Steinbeck had dinner at my house, but Howard Pease—he was a *real writer!* When I learned that he actually lived in our neighborhood, San Francisco's Richmond District, I wanted my father to invite *him* to dinner. But no luck. I guess he wasn't a Macmillan author.



At that time, I wanted to be an author like Howard Pease. Howard and me, traveling all over the world, gathering material for our books. Eventually, my writing ambitions changed. You have to figure out what your strength is. You have to find your voice. But I'm lucky that I've always known what I wanted to do. How many people can say that? Writers and artists, who are rumored to be so loony, are actually the most stable people in the world, because they've known all along how they want to spend their lives.

One rainy autumn evening a few months ago, I visited the Children's Book Council in New York, where I discussed my work with a group of young editors. One of them asked, "Why do you choose to write for children rather than adults?" I tried to explain what attracts me to this field. But the best answer, the answer I wish I had given, if only I had thought of it at the time, is, "Why do *you* choose to edit books for children rather than adults?"

Mitchell, William Saroyan, and others famous and not-so-famous.

My father would stand at the head of the table with a huge leg of lamb, my mother's specialty, on a platter before him. He would cut and bone and slice that impressive hunk of meat with artful flourishes and with a running commentary on the finer principles of carving. Propped up on the dining table beside him as he carved and talked was a book, a book on carving, published by Macmillan, no doubt. As I said, books played a big role in our household.

We fed some well-known authors, but when I was in the fourth and fifth grades, their books didn't mean much to me. My literary hero at that time was Howard

A book of history or biography for young readers offers an author unique challenges and opportunities. Such a book is essentially a distillation of the subject for an audience eager to be introduced to that subject. It need not be comprehensive or definitive. It isn't expected to offer a bold new interpretation of its subject or troves of previously unknown information. On the contrary, it aims for brevity and tries to avoid oversimplification. It attempts to probe deeply, if not at great length. It seeks to avoid stereotypes. And it strives to evoke the past,

even the distant past, with the vitality, the immediacy, of a personal memoir.

I welcome the discipline a book such as that imposes on the author. It's something like writing a sonnet: your words must fit within a certain format, and every word counts. And I regard such books as a specialized and demanding art form. The art lies in the selection and arrangement of documented facts, in

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the closely observed and painstakingly constructed narrative, and in the imposition upon those facts of the author's unique sensibility. It requires a feat of the imagination as well as diligent research to make the past live again for the reader. It's a much greater challenge to convey the spirit and essence of a life in a hundred pages than to write a multivolume, "definitive" tome that includes every known detail about that life.

I'm sometimes asked what age level I write for. I suppose it depends on what you mean by "age." Anyone who writes for kids, whether fiction or nonfiction, is writing for the kid that still resides within himself. So, the reader looking over my shoulder as I write is me. I write for myself and for other kids just like me. I write for Miss Tennessee Kent, the fifth-grade teacher who once encouraged me. And I write for my grown-up friends. If a book isn't good enough for them, it isn't good enough for kids, either. My books are aimed at anyone who can read at that level—all the way up to senility.

Speaking of age levels: Recently I was signing books at Texas A&M when Donna Norton, who organized that conference, came over and whispered to me, "There's a boy standing in line with his

father, a third grader, who says that he loves history and that you're his favorite author. They drove all the way from Houston because he wanted to meet you. So pay special attention to him."

So I was properly alerted when this rather short third grader and his dad reached the signing table. The kid was holding two of my books, my biographies of Abraham Lincoln and Franklin Delano

Roosevelt. He handed me the Lincoln biography to sign.

"Were you able to read this yourself?" I asked.

"Sure!"

"Did you find it difficult?"

"Not really. Ask me a question."

"OK. How tall was Abraham Lincoln?"

"He was six feet-four inches tall."

"You're right," I said. "And what is Lincoln especially famous for?"

"He signed the Emancipation Proclamation."

"Now how about that book," I said, pointing to the Roosevelt biography. "Were you able to read that one yourself?"

"Sure! Ask me a question."

"What was wrong with Franklin Roosevelt?" I asked.

"He couldn't walk, because he had been crippled by polio."

"Well then, why was he able to become president?" I expected the kid to say something such as, "Because he was such a strong leader," or "Because he made such good speeches." But no, his answer was: "Roosevelt became president because Herbert Hoover wasn't able to handle the Great Depression."

So the moral is, never underestimate a young reader.

Biographies have always held a powerful attraction for readers of every age. It's not difficult to understand why. We are fascinated by other peoples' lives because we are constantly learning how to live our own lives. And those people who have had to struggle in some way, to overcome personal weakness or character flaws, to confront adversity, to reach a goal—they are the ones who engage our imaginations most deeply. Their stories offer the most profound insights into human character and behavior. And of course, biography lends itself to the art of narrative, to the endlessly fascinating spectacle of character meeting circumstance and either changing events or being changed by them.

It's been said that writing a biography is almost like falling in love. Maybe it's more like being married, because you live with your biographical subject for such a long time. And while you know what attracted you to that subject in the first place, the person changes and reveals aspects of him or herself that you certainly didn't anticipate. It becomes an authentic emotional relationship. The person you are writing about comes to life in your imagination.

Phyllis Rose, the biographer of Josephine Baker and Virginia Woolf, has observed, "Biographies *are* a little like marriages. You really only have room for one or two." So I guess I'm in real trouble since, at last count, I had written fourteen full-length biographies.

I've learned that no matter how well-documented a life may be, there are always plenty of missing pieces, unresolved questions of motive and behavior that can never be answered. The biographer is inevitably confronted with the mysteries of personality, the inconsistencies of

character, the paradoxes and ambiguities and contradictions of human behavior. For example, some folks are unusually inclined to fabrications about their past. At least three of my own biographical subjects lopped a few years off their ages at one time or another. As Elizabeth Hardwick has noted, it's the biographer's job to unstitch the embroidery with which so many people decorate their lives.

Babe Didrikson Zaharias was, in her time, the most famous woman in America after Eleanor Roosevelt. But when she died in 1956, the press didn't seem to know how old she was. Over the years she had changed her birth date a few times—on her application for the 1932 Olympic Games, on visa applications, in interviews, even in her autobiography. She was so successful in this deception that confusion over her true age followed her right to the grave.

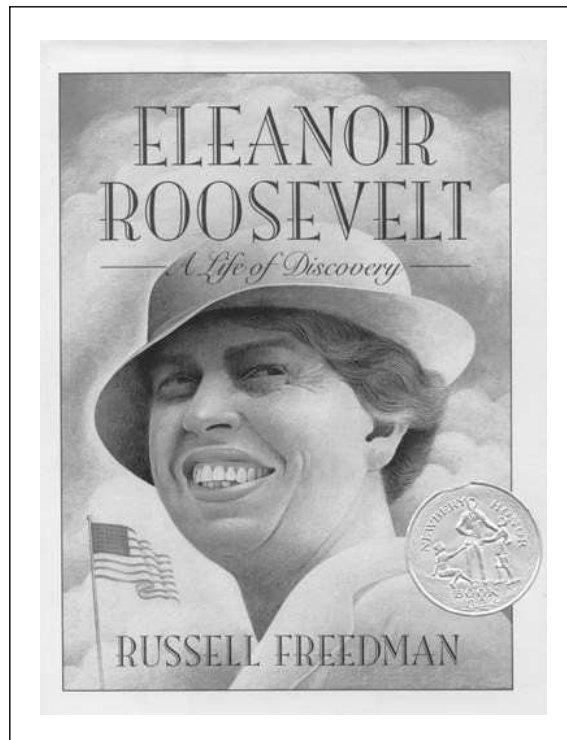
I visited Babe's grave in Beaumont, Texas. At the entrance to her burial plot in Beaumont's Forest Park Cemetery, an official Texas state historical marker informs the visitor that she was born in 1914, the birth date claimed in her autobiography. Just a few steps away, engraved on her marble tombstone, her date of birth is given as 1911. According to her baptismal certificate (her birth certificate is missing), she was born on June 26, 1911.

No life can be recaptured wholly as it was. Every one of my own biographical subjects has been described by a close friend or associate as so complex a personality as to be ultimately unknowable. Abraham Lincoln was, and I quote, "The most secretive—reticent—shut-mouthed man that ever lived," according to his law partner, William Herndon, who knew him as well as anyone. "Franklin Roosevelt was not a simple man," said Francis Perkins, FDR's secretary of labor and one of his oldest friends. "He was the most complicated man I ever knew."

While I've never considered writing a biography of Ronald Reagan, I was surprised to find that Edmund Morris, his official biographer, called him—the Ronald Reagan we thought we knew

so well—"the most mysterious man I have ever confronted. It is impossible to understand him. I went through a year of depression because I felt that with all my research, how come I can't understand the first thing about him? I only came out of this despair when I found out that everybody else who had ever known him, including his wife, is equally bewildered."

Writing biography is an art because there is no clear-cut way to do it. A convincing narrative of a life relies as much on imagination and intuition as on scholarship and research. You study the documented



evidence, you immerse yourself in your subject's life and times, and as you work, a picture slowly emerges in your mind, almost as though the person is present with you in the room. At some point, the material begins to speak to you, and you begin to make choices, to shed your preconceptions and rid your mind of stereotypes.

That's essential if you want your subject to live on the page. It's vital to get rid of stereotypes when you are writing for children. A stereotype is alienating. It makes it more difficult to understand the experiences of others. A good book should make it easier.

I don't pretend to aim for total "objectivity" when I'm writing about the past. Historians always maintain a double vision, of the past and the present, trying to recreate the past as truthfully as possible, while enjoying the privilege accorded to posterity—the ability to judge and evaluate. Truth has to be sought not only by scholarship but, I believe, by fair-mindedness, an attempt to measure the subject against certain ethical, social, and historical ideals. The historian endeavors to be objective. He does his best. But he knows that his assessment of the evidence is inevitably colored by his own life experiences and system of values.

When I'm working on a book, I try to visit many of the places where the events I'm writing about took place. In Washington, D.C., at the boarding house across the street from Ford's Theater, I saw the four-poster bed in which Abraham Lincoln died. They had to lay him out diagonally across the cornhusk mattress that wasn't long enough for his six-foot, four-inch frame. In the French village of Coupvray, I saw the bed in which Louis Braille was born, built into an alcove of a two hundred-year-old stone cottage that is now a small municipal museum. They've tried to keep everything in that cottage just as it was when Louis, blinded at the age of three, was growing up there during the early 1800s.

I pressed my hand against the cool stone walls inside that cottage. I felt the wooden stools and heavy wooden table that stand in front of the fireplace, ran my fingers along the worn sink with its stone drainpipe running along the wall, climbed the narrow stone stairs to the garret bedroom, which Louis shared with his brother and two sisters. Outside in the courtyard, I entered the workshop where Louis's father made saddles and harnesses, where his tools are still neatly arranged on the wall above the worn wooden workbench, and where Louis, playing one day with those forbidden tools, accidentally blinded himself with an awl.

Venturing beyond the cottage, I listened to the gurgling brook, crossed the old

stone bridge, and climbed the steep stony street leading up to the village square, where today a monument to Braille stands. Later, back in New York, in my study, with the aid of my remembered impressions, I tried to recreate the scenes two centuries ago in which Louis, tap-tap-tapping with his little blind boy's cane, feeling his way, listening to every sound, learns to find his way around his home and the village beyond.

Research for my book about Confucius took me much further back in history. I traveled to mainland China, to the ancient market town of Qufu in Shandong Province, where Confucius spent most of his life twenty-five hundred years ago. Since Qufu today has no airport and no nearby train station, the old town, while flourishing at the center of a rich farming area, has remained relatively unchanged over the years. I was astonished to learn that the two main streets of Qufu intersect today exactly where they did when Confucius lived there. And not only that. Because this particular region of China has never been settled by invaders or conquerors, the ethnic makeup of the local people is pretty much the same as it was in Confucius's day. I would stand at that main intersection and study the faces in the passing crowd and imagine that those were the faces Confucius saw as he stood at that exact same spot two-and-half millennia ago.

Despite some difficulty in reaching Qufu, people do come from all over the world to pay homage to the philosopher. I spent a week there, drinking Confucius brand bottled water, eating Confucius cookies, buying Confucius souvenirs, and visiting the various temples, museums, and shrines dedicated to Qufu's favorite son. If I smoked, I no doubt would have been smoking the Confucius brand of cigarettes that were on sale everywhere. I visited the philosopher's birthplace, a small farming village about twenty miles outside the city. I lingered in the temple courtyard where he once held forth under an apricot tree as he lectured to the students who crowded around and sat at his feet. And I stood before his grave in a forest preserve just north of Qufu, where his son and grandson and other members of his family are also buried. It is said to be the oldest family cemetery in the world.

Standing there with a friend, I felt unaccountably moved.

Before leaving Qufu, I went back to that historic intersection for one last look. Overhead, a huge banner stretches across the street, displaying, in Chinese ideograms, a famous Confucian saying: "Isn't it a joy to greet friends who come from afar." That's what attracted me to the man—the uncanny sense that he could be a contemporary, for his voice rings clear and true down through the centuries. Surely he would have had something to say about the current culture of spin that has infected our language with toxic terms such as "collateral damage,"

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terms that are intended to conceal rather than inform.

"What's the first thing you would do if you could take over a government?" Confucius was asked.

"Without a doubt," he replied, "I'd want to call things by their right name. If we don't call things by their correct names, then words don't mean a thing. When words don't match reality, what is said isn't the same as what is meant. And when what is said isn't the same as what is meant, we can't think clearly and nothing is accomplished. Calling things by their right names makes it possible to speak truthfully about them."

As I read and reread Confucius's sayings in *The Analects*, he seemed to be almost leaping off the page, grabbing my arm, looking me in the eye. He seemed even

closer than his contemporary Socrates, who is standing there down toward the end of the block.

"I just finished reading your book on Confucius," a boy in Brooklyn wrote recently. "It was very interesting. My favorite part was when Confucius went out to a field to practice archery, then went to the river to fish and sing. I was amazed that he knew 305 songs by heart."

Confucius wouldn't need an iPod!

So that's what made this ancient philosopher seem real to this kid—singing songs, shooting arrows, fishing in the river—

just as bas reliefs of bows and arrows, of hunting dogs and marsh birds, made the ancient Etruscans seem so real to Giannina, made her realize that, however long ago, the Etruscans really did live, like everyone else.

"I liked your book very much," the boy from Brooklyn continues. "What gave you the idea to write this? Was it the paper saying in a fortune cookie?"

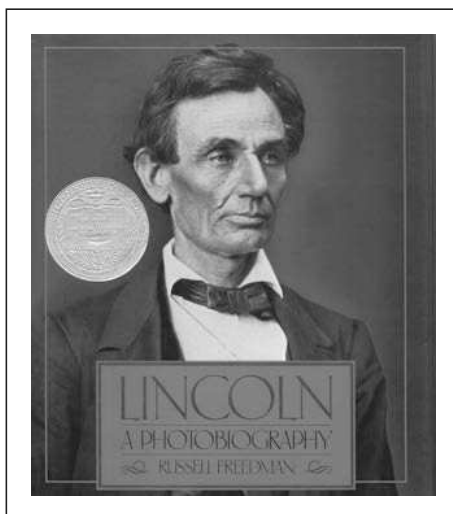
I often wonder if we ask too much of history. We want to believe that if we study history closely enough, we can avoid repeating it. Is that true? By studying the past, can we really avoid the errors of the past?

Would our nation's leaders have committed the United States to a futile war in Vietnam, a watershed event of my generation, if they had truly understood

that country's history and culture, its tenacious thousand-year struggle against foreign domination—domination by China, by France, by Japan? Today, three decades after the pointless loss of more than fifty thousand American lives and God knows how many Vietnamese lives, Vietnam is independent, the sky did not fall, and the biggest hotel in Hanoi is the Hilton.

Would the United States have invaded Iraq if our leaders had listened to the advice of people who actually know something about Iraq's history? Brent Scowcroft, national security adviser to President Gerald Ford and the first President Bush, warned the current administration, publicly and persistently, that an invasion of Iraq would open a Pandora's box of tribal and religious conflict. An invasion, Scowcroft predicted, would require a large-scale, long-term military occupation, possibly result in civil war, and "seriously jeopardize, if not destroy, the global counterterrorist campaign we have undertaken." Scowcroft did not look into a crystal ball. He made those predictions based on his deep understanding of the history of Iraq and the Middle East.

"If you study the past and use it to understand the present," said Confucius, "then you're worthy to be a teacher."



What finally matters most to me about the reading and writing of history is the way it deepens us, allows us to glimpse worlds so different from our own—the way an understanding of history extends our own feelings and compassion, enlarges our ability to recognize everyone's humanity.

Isn't that what all literature—novels, poetry, history, biography—wants to convey: a shared sense of humanity, a sense of the mysterious connections that link each one of us here today to all those who have come before?

The challenge for anyone who writes history for young readers is how to present the world to children honestly, as it has been in the past and as it is today, without fostering optimistic illusions and yet without threatening the safety of childhood; how to encourage the idealism of eager young readers, the better angels of their natures; how to shield them from cynicism and yet still give them forthright history.

At its best, a forthright book of history can be both inspirational and subversive. Reading such a book, an idealistic youngster may feel inspired to go out and change the world.

Surely, that is a goal we can all share. ☞

The Women's National Book Association-Ann Heidbreder Eastman Grant

OPPORTUNITIES

The Women's National Book Association-Ann Heidbreder Eastman Grant is available for librarians interested in learning about the relationship between the library and publishing professions.

The WNBA offers a grant of up to \$750 for a librarian to take a course or participate in an institute devoted to aspects of publishing as a profession or to provide reimbursement for such study completed within the past year.

Eligibility: Librarians holding an MLS or its equivalent and having at least two years of post master's work experience in a library are eligible to apply. The primary criterion will be the likelihood of career benefit to the person taking the course.

Deadline: November 1, 2006

For More Information: Guidelines are available at www.ala.org/work/pubs/eastman.html or contact the Grant Administrator, American Library Association, 50 East Huron Street, Chicago, IL 60611; fax: 312-280-4380; rtoler@ala.org.

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